An Exploration of Elementary School-Aged Children’s Cognitions of Fruits and Vegetables

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Abstract

Objective
To examine cognitions and behaviors of 6- to 11-year-olds related to fruits and vegetables (F/V).

Methods
A brief survey was completed by 194 kids from 3 states (NJ, FL, WV). Of these children, 33 participated in focus group discussions on F/Vs conducted by trained moderators. Two researchers coded and analyzed focus group data to identify trends and common themes.

Results
Survey results indicate kids ate fruits more often than vegetables, averaging 4.74±2.56SD and 4.06±2.73SD days/week, respectively. Lunch and dinner was when kids most commonly ate the F/V they reported liking (apples, strawberries, broccoli, carrots). Focus group discussions revealed kids felt F/Vs were important to eat and demonstrated good knowledge of the benefits of F/Vs (helping bodies grow stronger, promoting good eyesight and healthy teeth, giving the body energy throughout the day). Children felt parents played a large role in influencing their F/V intake by encouraging kids to eat a variety of F/Vs for health and nutritional benefits. Kids reported their F/Vs preferences and tastes were similar to their parents and indicated they often shared F/V with them. If they observed parents eating F/V frequently, kids said they would try to eat F/Vs more often. Several children indicated that parents rewarded them for trying new F/Vs while other kids reported their parents forced them to eat F/Vs. Numerous barriers prevented kids from eating a variety of F/Vs often, such as disliking taste, texture, or preparation method and lack of F/V accessibility and availability. To overcome barriers, kids wanted parents to incorporate F/Vs into their diets. Other strategies kids proposed were letting kids help prepare F/Vs, mixing F/Vs into other foods, serving F/Vs with meals, serving sauces or dips with F/Vs (caramel, peanut butter, salad dressing), cutting F/Vs into fun shapes, rewarding kids for eating F/Vs with food (candy/chips) and non-food items (money/toys), planting a vegetable garden, buying F/Vs kids prefer, and making F/Vs readily accessible and available in the home.

Conclusion
Future obesity prevention programs should aim to help children learn effective strategies for incorporating more F/Vs into their diets and helping parents understand how kids can take an active role in improving their F/V intake.

Focus Group Content Analysis

Children’s Suggestions for Overcoming Barriers to Eating F/Vs

Parents can…
- Incorporate F/Vs into meals or snacks
- Make F/Vs accessible and available
- Let kids help with meal preparation
- Serve F/Vs with meals
- Serve F/V with sauces or dips
- Cut F/V into fun shapes
- Reward kids for eating F/Vs with food or non-food items
- Plant a vegetable garden

Strengths and Limitations

- Diverse sample from 3 states (FL, NJ, WV)
- Constant comparison method used to identify data saturation point
- Focus groups were conducted by different moderators, however
- Aim to help parents with elementary school-aged children learn effective strategies for incorporating more F/Vs into family members’ diets
- Help parents understand how kids can take an active role in improving their F/V intake

Conclusion

- Kids were aware of the importance of incorporating more F/Vs into their diets
- Children felt parents played a pivotal role in facilitating their F/V intake
- Future obesity prevention programs should

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